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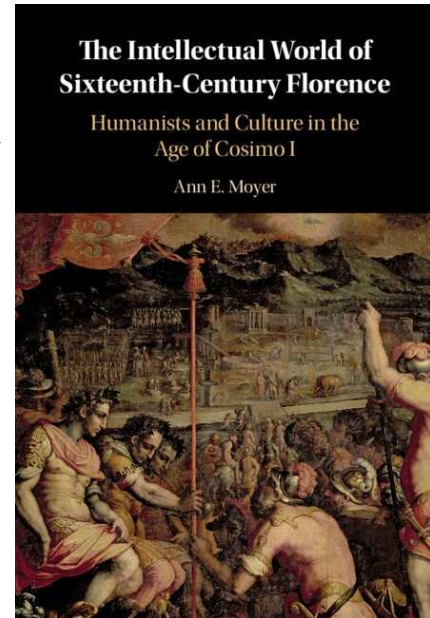


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Book Review

**Anna E. Moyer, *The Intellectual World of Sixteenth-Century Florence: Humanists and Culture in the Age of Cosimo I***



**HANNAH TOMLIN**

In her recent book, *The Intellectual World of Sixteenth-Century Florence: Humanists and Culture in the Age of Cosimo I*, Ann Moyer makes bold claims regarding the vivacity of Florentine culture in the sixteenth century. She makes a case for the development of an intellectual world that celebrated Florentine language, literature, art, culture, and custom, arguing that these topics are equally worthy of study as their ancient and classical counterparts.

Chapter One, 'Florence and Cosimo', paints an elegant and engaging picture of Florence during the early part of the sixteenth century, successfully invoking the atmosphere in which the texts at the heart of Moyer's work were produced. The urban and political landscape that produced scholars such as Piero Vettori, Benedetto Varchi, Pier Francesco Giambullari, Giambattista Gelli, and Giorgio Vasari was one that was touched by significant social and political turmoil. The movement of Florentine citizens into exile, the influence of external powers such as the papacy and the Holy Roman Empire, and the support of Cosimo I as Duke of Florence and later Grand Duke of Tuscany resulted in an environment ripe for scholarly exchange and intellectual innovation. As Moyer demonstrates through the subsequent chapters, this fertile environment aided in the development of a methodology that could be applied to literature, language, history, the arts and culture. This methodology was built on a new appreciation for accuracy and truth, as well as an inclination to widen the source base of studies of the past that laid the foundations for modern academic methods and even, she claims, produced the first forays into art history.

Moyer's work is based on meticulous research. Each chapter undertakes a close reading of a number of texts, from Varchi's *L'Ercolano* and Giambullari's *Il Gello* to Vasari's *Le Vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori, ed architettori*. Moyer clearly demonstrates the ways in which communication between scholars via letters and organisations such as universities and the Accademia Fiorentina, coupled with their engagement and even collaboration with each others' publications, resulted in the evolution of Florentine studies and the intellectual culture surrounding it. The book is also peppered with anecdotal detail that gives life to the

relationships between the men behind these works, their professional conflicts and their fruitful collaborations, highlighting an impressive degree of comparative and archival research that should create a well-rounded view of the intellectual world of Florence in the sixteenth century.

Moyer's methodology, however, does not quite allow her to achieve this end. Whilst the exile of prominent scholars during the political turmoil in Florence at the beginning of the sixteenth century meant that the geographical reach was wide, *The Intellectual World of Sixteenth-Century Florence* gives little indication of the reach of scholarly activity beyond the circle that produced it. By focusing on the relationships and collaborations between scholars and on institutions such as the Accademia Fiorentina, Moyer invokes the atmosphere of a boys' club. These men debated and collaborated amongst themselves and the fact that the same names crop up time and again throughout the book suggests a circle that was narrower than it was inclusive. They may have helped to write, finish, edit, and publish each other's material, thereby participating in a co-operative and collaborative culture, but the fact remains that the intellectual world of sixteenth-century Florence, as described by Moyer, was dominated by a relatively small group of men, many of whom were firmly under the influence of Cosimo de' Medici.

The resulting product is the sort of top-down history that, in 2020, feels somewhat old-fashioned and misplaced at best. Whilst it may have fallen beyond the scope of the work, Moyer's hypothesis would have benefited greatly from consideration of the reception of these works. She makes largely unsubstantiated claims regarding the positive contemporary response to the treatises she has studied and demonstrates no inclination to consider the contexts in which they were consumed by the wider public. Meanwhile, she openly admits that becoming a man of letters was, generally speaking, reserved for members of the Florentine elite. As it stands, the level of extrapolation required to get from the scholarship to Moyer's claims of a vivacious intellectual life that centred on Florentine studies is just too great. The ideas of a small group of elite men cannot possibly be taken stand for those of the rest of the population.

Such further investigation may have had a place were it not for the extensive précis that forms the bulk of Moyer's text. The close reading of primary source material is certainly impressive, but one wonders whether a summary of each of them is entirely necessary. This modus operandi results in a heavy and dry final product that even the occasional flashes of anecdotal amusement struggle to lift. It does nothing for Moyer's claims for liveliness and vibrancy. What emerges is an impression of a turgid intellectual world populated by infighting scholars bickering over sources and subject matter with minimal concern for their relevance beyond their immediate circle: the irony of the parallels between this and general perception of modern academia seems to be lost on the author.

*The Intellectual World of Sixteenth-Century Florence* is thus a paradox of a text. Its thorough scholarship renders it an excellent account of late-renaissance studies of Florentine language, literature, history, arts, and culture, perhaps one that would find its ideal use as a companion for students also considering the texts that form its basis. In fulfilling this purpose, however, it undermines itself. As proof that sixteenth-century Florentine intellectual culture maintained the vibrancy of its Renaissance heights, it falls sadly short.